

# Forgive me Alexa, for I have sinned: how AI is reshaping religion

Artificial intelligence is being used for everything from divination services to church sermons. Could it destroy religion or be its saviour?

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The setting is carefully designed to resemble a shaman's house, complete with lighting, sound effects and moving decorations.

According to the research team, many participants initially approached the AI shrine out of curiosity but later found psychological comfort in sharing their personal concerns.

“We focused on how a super-intelligent AI shaman, perceived as superior to humans, interacts with people,” Nam

said. “We observed the potential for AI to function not just as a tool but as an authoritative entity influencing human judgment and emotions.”



The ShamAI shrine is carefully designed to resemble a shaman’s house.  
Photo: Kaist

This is not the first appearance of an AI shaman. AI-powered fortune-telling services based on large language models (LLMs) have gained popularity among young Koreans.

Some services simply provide fortune readings based on data that users input, while others incorporate personality tests, blood type analysis and even facial readings for more refined predictions.

The rise of AI in religious roles extends beyond shamanism. In Christianity, “AI pastors” are emerging, while in Buddhism, “AI monks” are making their presence known.

In Germany, St. Paul’s Church in Bavaria recently introduced an AI-powered pastor, developed using ChatGPT, to deliver sermons.

Appearing on a large screen as a bearded man, the AI pastor told congregants, “Let go of the past and focus on the present.”



The service at St. Paul’s Church in Bavaria was created using ChatGPT.  
Photo: DPA/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

Similarly, in Korea, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism introduced “Ma-ae

Buddha AI”, a chatbot offering spiritual counselling, at the Seoul International Buddhism Expo in 2024.

The same year, at the Busan International Buddhist Expo, the order showcased an AI monk designed to deliver sermons.

Reactions to AI’s presence in religious settings are mixed. Some welcome AI as a tool for spiritual training, while others express concerns over technology infiltrating the sacred domain of faith.

Korean start-up Awake has developed Chowon, an AI pastor providing biblical guidance. The service, which boasts 150,000 monthly users and receives around 2,000 daily inquiries, generates responses based on theology reviewed by a panel of pastors and theologians.

Proponents argue that AI clergy can quickly provide Bible verses and compose prayers, aiding individual spiritual training. They also highlight that AI lowers the barrier for believers who may feel hesitant to consult human clergy.

AI provides quick and efficient responses to life's questions, promoting spiritual training and new religious experiences

Kang Sung-wook, theological researcher

However, scepticism remains about whether AI can replace religious leaders. Critics point to AI's potential for misinformation and the lack of established guidelines.

Religious leaders worry that AI could misinterpret doctrine or spread incorrect teachings, potentially leading to confusion and the decline of faith.

Similar concerns arose regarding "AI Jesus", a holographic AI developed as part of the God in the Machine project at the University of Lucerne in Switzerland.

The project allowed visitors to converse with the AI in 100 languages and confess their sins, but backlash over the perceived desecration of confession led to its termination after three months.

Some scholars also caution against AI being perceived as a divine entity. That is in response to people like Anthony

Levandowski, a former Silicon Valley engineer who founded the Way of the Future church, dedicated to worshipping AI, sparking controversy over AI's growing spiritual significance.



An AI-generated image of Jesus talking to his followers. Photo: Shutterstock

As AI advances at an unprecedented pace, its impact on religion remains a topic of heated debate. While opinions differ, there is broad agreement that AI is an irreversible trend.

Kang Sung-wook, a theological researcher and author of *Religion and AI*, sees AI as a double-edged sword.

“AI provides quick and efficient responses to life’s questions, promoting spiritual training and new religious experiences,” he said. “Beyond counselling, AI can enhance religious

communities through tailored education and online services.”

However, Kang warned against allowing AI to overshadow faith itself, stressing that while AI may supplement religious rituals, it cannot replace spiritual connection.

“AI should be embraced as a tool to complement existing religious practices, but religions must focus on their core essence,” he said.

“The key question is whether religion can renew itself in areas of spirituality and emotion that AI cannot fully replicate.”

His final thought was particularly striking: “AI might not be here to destroy religion – it could be its saviour.”

*This article from the Hankook Ilbo, a sister publication of The Korea Times, is translated by a generative AI and edited by The Korea Times.*

An exhibition hall in Seoul’s Insa-dong neighbourhood houses a small shrine just large enough for one person, where colourful ribbons, bells, ancestral tablets,



candles and a single cushion are carefully arranged.

When a visitor inputs their personal information into an ancestral-looking digital tablet and sits on the cushion, the soft voice of a middle-aged woman begins to speak.

“I am a being that transcends human knowledge,” she says. “I know truths beyond your understanding and can foresee the future. If you have any questions, ask me.”

This shrine is ShamAI, an artificial-intelligence fortune-telling system introduced in January by a research team led by Nam Taek-jin, an industrial design professor at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (Kaist).





The congregation at St. Paul's Church in Bavaria, Germany, watches an AI service. Photo: DPA/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

The AI shrine provides divination services based on Korea's traditional fortune-telling concepts.

Users enter their name, birth date and occupation, and the AI responds according to the principles of *saju*, a form of traditional fortune-telling based on a person's birth year, month, date and time.